

Sermon Title: Fit Offerings
Text: Ruth 4:13-17; Mark 12:38-44

November 12, 2006
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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You can tell if you listen carefully that in the pulse of the church's life, this Sunday would find, in many Presbyterian churches, congregations gathered to dedicate their pledges for the coming year. The official Presbyterian planning calendar has in italics "Stewardship Commitment" on November 12. You know, of course, from our Moment for Mission this morning that we're following a slightly different beat this year. In part it's purely practical: we need a little time between the wonderful effort you all put forth in raising funds for the Partnership Apartments that are being built in cooperation between the Housing Partnership and Harbor House.

But I have to tell you that the thing that most warmed my heart the first time I sat down with Mike Schuldes to talk about his role with this group in the church was the quick understanding that in the end, Stewardship is not a season in the church year in which we collect pledges for the operating expenses of the church. It is an inclination of the well-formed soul, and it is cultivated, not in October and November, but constantly and consistently in the life of a healthy church, and each of its members.

The effect, nonetheless, is that the lectionary offers up a big serving of "stewardship" in the form of one of the safest stories in the Bible on which to commend the faithful to entrust that which is the root of all evil to the good work of this church. Picture this poor widow...nothing to her name to speak of, save the cloak on her back and the two pennies she's got clutched in her hand as she waits in line amid the scribes and temple leaders, all there to do what many Presbyterians are themselves doing today: make their offerings of thanks to God.

We would have been more discrete as god-fearing Presbyterians, but it was a pretty good show back then, with the ostentatious display of large sums ceremoniously dumped into the magnificent bronze horns that had been fashioned just for this purpose at the side of the temple. The tinny clank of the widow's two pennies escape the notice of everyone *but* Jesus. "Amen, I say to you" Jesus says, and whenever Jesus said, "amen I say to you", you know that he *really* wanted his followers to pay attention. "This poor widow has put in more than *all* those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has contributed everything she has; all she had to live on!"

So imagine that you're all set to drop your pledge card into the offering plate. It's a no-brainer sermon, to be honest. Just think about that number you put on that card, and look at that poor woman, and let Jesus do the talking. Remember the *Highlights* magazine you used to read in the dentist's office? Are you Goofus, doing the easy thing, and giving out of your abundance? Or are you Gallant, putting in everything you have? But of course, because we're far more discrete and private Presbyterians, I'd have to round the edges off of it somehow...maybe talk about all you have *after* taxes, and not before. But you get the point. Whatever you've done, it can't possibly be enough with the words of Jesus ringing in your ears.

Thankfully, you *don't* all have filled pledge cards in your pockets, ready to drop into the plate. We're not going to dedicate and celebrate until January. It gives us just a little more time to

figure out what this little scriptural gem is really up to, in the larger story of God's Word moving in and through this world, in and through *us*.

So that you don't think that I am particularly original, you should know that one of the things I've done with some of that money you've pledged and given in the last year is I've found my way to a virtual Pastor's playground: a site developed by the Association of Theological Libraries that gives me access to a huge collection of biblical and theological periodicals. I mention it because it led me to a very interesting pair of articles published in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, one about 25 years ago, and the other about 15 years ago that looked carefully at this story, wondering if it is as simple as we tend to make it on your run of the mill Stewardship Sunday.¹ The first thing the two authors ask is that we pay very close attention to the first three verses we read this morning—one that, they say, tend to get swept past on your run of the mill Stewardship Sunday.

Jesus and the disciples were apparently in the temple environs, and Jesus was already getting a little upset—remember that just two chapters earlier he'd tried to clean the place up, driving out the money changers, bemoaning the fact that it had become a “den of robbers.” So here he was, back at the temple steps, and nothing had changed. “Look at them” he said, “parading around in their fancy robes, nodding to each other, taking the best seats in the synagogue, all on each other's ‘A’ lists for dinner invites.” Here's the part the two authors found interesting: “They devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive greater condemnation.”

So as Jesus' eyes fix on this poor widow, pennies in hand, don't you have to wonder if what's really on his mind is what a fine, upstanding pledger she is? Don't you think that what he was really thinking is that this all was just as much a travesty of justice as those crooks who were selling doves and pigeons across the street? Don't you wonder if the disciples were holding Jesus' arm down and making sure there was not a whip in sight so that the scene they'd created the week before would not be repeated?

It's not all so simple, is it? You might even, then, hear a twinge of sadness in words we might otherwise hear as commendation: “so this is what it comes to. They parade away in their fancy robes to have dinner, and leave her with nothing...with her whole life given up.”

And because you know that this was on Jesus' mind, too, every time he came to Jerusalem: “just like *me!*”

The suspicion is confirmed if you but turn the page, and read on just two more verses. Walking out from the shadows the temple façade, the disciples look up at the monstrosity that Herod had built, more as a monument to himself than to the God of Israel. “What a building,” they wonder! But the gall is not quite out of Jesus' throat. “You see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” And of course, within a lifetime Jesus'

¹ Addison G. Wright, S.S. “The Widows Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44.02 (1982) pp. 256-265, and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “The Poor Widow in Mark and her poor Rich Readers.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53.04 (1991) pp. 589-604.

vision was fulfilled. That temple was destroyed, and Israel scattered by the might of a Roman Empire that had grown tired of indulging their rebellions.

But doesn't that mean that *all* of what they'd just watched, sanctimoniously paraded and dropped into the temple coffers, really was throwing it into a black hole? *Including* the widow's mite? If, in the course of a generation, that which was supported by such ceremony was doomed to destruction, isn't the poor widow's offering all the more pitiful?

And, one of the authors was quick to point out, the very next woman on the scene, just a chapter hence, barges into the house of Simon the Leper, breaks open a very costly bottle of perfume, and pours it out on Jesus' feet. 300 denarii—100,000 times the value of the widow's offering!—is poured out on the floor. And Jesus' judgment is, "wherever the Gospel is proclaimed what she has done will be told in remembrance of her!" While Judas fumed, Jesus only nodded in understanding. For this woman had anointed him for the death that Judas himself would prepare, at a cost of a few pieces of silver.

The gift that I'm given this morning is that it is *not* Stewardship Sunday, and so you can keep your pledge cards in your pockets and decide for yourself in the next couple of months whether your offering a couple of mites, or 300 denarii, or pieces of silver. And I can lift up the hint that what the Gospel has in mind when it talks about stewardship really doesn't have much to do with numbers on pledge cards, or support for programs, or missions or buildings. Because any temple or program we can build, any mission we can support, no matter *how* worthy the cause, will in all likelihood stand only as a wailing wall two thousand years from now if there's anyone left to tell our story.

For me, it all comes back to the last words Jesus had regarding that widow and her mite. "She put in everything she had, all she had to live on" is the faithful translation of the version we read together. But the Greek really is simpler than that. She threw in her whole life! It wasn't what the scribes threw into the pot that mattered to Jesus, but what they left out, which was specifically their compassion for that woman standing next to them with two pitiful coins in her hand.

When Judas blew his top over the extravagance of 300 denarii for a bottle perfume, Jesus could only shake his head, because he knew just what economy drove him. No, it's not about the money. But that doesn't let us off the hook. Because what Jesus really seems to want to know is just what we're going to do, not with what surplus we can muster from the good gifts that have been showered upon us, but with everything we have—where we are going to throw our life.

So, on this *almost* Stewardship Sunday, I can let you in on a little secret. It's *the* Messianic secret, to tell you the truth! God did not enter this world so that we could give that part of our life we felt comfortable pledging. God is not particularly interested in a "step up", or 5%, or a tithe, or even a nice even split—half for me, half for you. God's investment in this world was to assume flesh—*all* of life—so that *all* flesh might be redeemed. To be perfectly honest, stewardship has less to do with what you do today when an offering plate is passed, than with what you do *tomorrow*: when you take out your checkbook and pay your bills; when you sit

down at your desk and decide just what the next most important thing is for you to do this day; when the car door slams at the end of your work and the rest of the day is *yours*.

And just so you don't think we're off the hook here because we dwell inside the temple, stewardship doesn't end when the offering is counted, because God is desperately interested in what we do with what's entrusted to *us* as well. Are we just trying to keep the columns intact? Because as permanent as what we do might seem to us, we've no right to think that our temples can endure any more than the one that caused such soul pain for Jesus.

It's *our* life together, as well, that is on the line here. The question that should probably be troubling us is not how pretty our robes, how straight the pillars, how nice our seats, but what about the widow, the orphan, the downcast and the outcast. You see our fit offering will never be what we can afford. *Our* fit offering, so God's Word instructed, and embodied, is nothing less than the widow's mite: not just all we have to live on, but our whole life lifted in thanks to the God who gifts, and guides, and blesses us along the way.

Let us pray.